



Fr. Jacques Gilbert,  
O.M.I.

# Noémie, "An Admirable Mother"

*Excerpts from the booklet "Au large" published by Father Jacques Gilbert, O.M.I.*

In 1963, Father Jacques Gilbert published a booklet of some thirty pages, *"Au Large"*, in which he presented a short biography of his admirable mother Noémie. This book was destined primarily for young ladies preparing for their future, because life is not only a matter of beautiful dreams, but is "a trial to be overcome, a duty to be carried out, an ideal to be realized," as Father Jacques would write. Having come to know the richness of this remarkable woman's life, we are presenting a summary of that testimonial, prepared with the support of lengthy excerpts from what Father Jacques wrote.

Sister France Bergeron

## A PROMISING FUTURE

Noémie had finished her studies and was thinking about the future. In her private diary she wrote what was like a portent of what life had in store for her: "This morning, on awakening, all our small bedrooms were brimming over with sunshine. It was wonderful! And we welcomed that joyful sun. But, alas! some minutes later it disappeared behind dark clouds and we did not see it again all day. It seemed to me I saw in that an image of happiness that, in the golden age, appears to smile and promise a thousand joys for the future, but that soon disappears under all manner of trials, sadness and sorrows, and it barely manages, from time to time, to pierce this thick fog and shine feebly upon us. Oh! Is that all that earthly happiness is? It's a good thing we still have the immense, eternal happiness of heaven...."

"Emerging from boarding school at the age of 17, she soon met a gentleman friend who, two years later, took over the helm of her skiff.

"The choice could not have been better. Emile Gilbert was a doctor, a surgeon, a specialist in ophthalmology; he had a pleasant character, sound morals, was conscientious. He piloted the small craft with wisdom, skill and confidence. Joy reigned in the home: God blessed this union and the happiness was steadfast over the cradle that did not grow cold. It was the morning radiant with the rising sun."

## DARK CLOUDS IN THE SKY OF HAPPINESS

"Four tots were already prattling in the home full of hope when Jacques, the eleven-month-old baby, died after four months of sickness. It was the first cloud to temporarily eclipse the star of the golden rays.

"The parents, Christian spouses, sought and found their consolation in the faith... It reminded them that it would be wrong to mourn indefinitely the happiness of one who had become an elect. And the mutual love of this model couple grew under the trial as it did in their joy of having, in heaven, a saint of their very own.

"The angel that had disappeared was to live again in the fifth little one who was given its name, Jacques. He became the consoler of his good mama.

"But alas! a cloud, more dense than the first, came to hide again the bright sun. The handsome Jean, aged 4, was stricken with a disease in the spinal cord that threatened him with a perpetual infirmity.

"[In spite of it all, life went on] under the compassionate eyes of the father, under the vigilance of the admirable mother... How wise God is not to reveal His secrets except in the rhythm of events!"

## TRIAL IN ALL ITS SEVERITY

Indeed, no one knows what each day holds in store for him. Trial sometimes strikes suddenly, cruelly. One evening, when a storm was raging and the lightning flashing, the father, suffering from the flu, left his bed to respond to an urgent call.

"Conscientiously he assisted a poor woman who was in the process of becoming a mother, and then, his duty done, he returned home, shivering in the cold of that autumn night. He went down with pneumonia. Twelve days of sickness, then... on October 16, 1910, death snatched him from his weeping wife."

Noémie was only 27 years old. More than that, she was awaiting her seventh child. In spite of the heartache and the weight of the trial, her faith kept her strong and preserved her dignity. Six months after the passing of her husband she wrote to a close lady friend: "My grief does not lessen; it only becomes deeper the more I realize the depth of my trial. But, God be thanked, I am resigned to it. I have not the right to ask the dear God why He shattered my happiness, since that happiness came from Him. All I ask of Him is the courage to carry on alone to the end of my task, a task I foresee as being ever so heavy at times. After all, Providence is there, always, and my dear companion is watching over me, as I have remarked a number of times already since his departure..."

Yes, the task was very heavy for Noémie who now had to take on a double role in regard to her boys. But "she molded the souls of her little ones, persuaded that God takes back His gifts only in order to give better ones." There was already Paul, Marc, Jean, Jacques (the first Jacques having died at the age of 11 months) and Emile, when the youngest child was born, another boy. He was given the name of André. This was because the virtuous father had wanted each of his boys to bear the name of an apostle. So that is how it was, except for the second last, Emile, whose name was chosen by the mother who insisted that one of them bear the name of her beloved spouse. "If she desired nothing for herself, she nevertheless entertained in her heart great dreams for her children." She had long ago given them to the good God and she would have been happy to see them one day become priests.

Moreover, the worry over the health of Jean, the third in the family, remained. He still suffered much. "The doctors hope for his cure, but the treatments are long."

"The better to carry out her task as

educator, this mother, a stout soul, asked the good God for health. But the Lord presented her with the cross!" Some years later she was stricken with tuberculosis, while André, the last of the family and now two and a half years old, in his turn took flight for heaven. At his birth, some months after the death of her dear spouse, she wrote, concerning André, 'The dear God could not have given me a greater consolation in my trial.' Speaking later to a lady friend, she said, 'He was sick from the age of thirteen days with tubercular meningitis. I realized at that moment that he would not get better and that the dear God was asking me for his little soul, so dearly loved, in order to have it now enjoy the heritage of heaven. I saw how much He loved him and, in my tears, I thanked Him for it, as for a favor.... I'm not surprised that he's dead. Every day I asked the Blessed Virgin to take him under her mantle so that no harm might come to him. She judged that on earth there was too much of it, and she took him before he could suffer from it.'

"Although bruised and battered under the weight of the trial the young widow drew from the ardor of her faith the courage to bow to the divine wishes," and, generously, she continued to devote herself to the upbringing of her five sons, striving at the same time to watch over, a little, her own health which was deteriorating.

"A pulmonary hemorrhage soon revealed to her how short a time on earth was left her. With a superhuman energy, she steeled herself to the threat 'so that,' she wrote, 'the little ones could grow up a little more...'

"The valiant mother drew from her devotion to the Eucharist the strength, not only in order to bear the trial without weakening, but also to draw closer to the good God. As long as her strength permitted her to do so, she went to Mass and received Communion every day."

## AT THE GATES OF HEAVEN

Noémie felt that heaven would soon be opening to her. She resigned herself, detached, serene, ready to depart, strong in a faith and a confidence that had matured under trial. She herself admitted that she could not understand this strength of soul. And, looking at her children whom she was leaving doubly orphaned, she said with assurance, 'I'm leaving without any worry; I've placed them under the mantle of the Blessed Virgin. I'm convinced she'll take care of them.' In her student diary she had written: 'It's a good thing we still have the immense, eternal happiness of heaven.' It was the hope of that happiness that always sustained her in that short, rich life. The bereavements and the sickness had detached her from this earth and her soul longed more than ever for the true, the immense eternal happiness.

Now at the gate of Paradise, she gave herself to abandonment of everything. A letter by her mother bears witness to this: "Our dear Noémie received holy Viaticum this morning. She is enjoying a happiness that has very little to do with earth. The great calm in her beautiful soul is absolutely consoling.

With a wonderful resignation she is taking leave of her children. She says that she'll be better able to look after them from On-High than from her bed. She has very edifying words of consolation for those around her, and her dear absent ones have their share in them. In spite of all her efforts to have us accept the cruel separation we feel all the enormous weight of this trial."

And Noémie's mother tells what happened then in another letter: "It is with a heart filled with sorrow that I am writing to announce the death of our dear Noémie. She flew to heaven Saturday afternoon at about 3:45, with all her children and the whole of our family about her. She fell asleep in the arms of the Blessed Virgin to wake up in heaven. Her death was that of a little saint. Her sacrifice has been sublime. With complete confidence she entrusted her children to the good God and her old mother. She was buried in the habit of a Tertiary of Saint Dominic. Everything was in keeping with that beautiful soul.

"Her last moments left an unforgettable memory with those about her. She held her own right to the last day, since they came to get me at the six o'clock Mass where, in accord with her wish, I had gone with her children. She bade us farewell Friday evening, at eight o'clock, after having received Our Lord for the last time. And during those hours, so anguishing for us and for her dear little ones, she had the great courage to smile at those who were weeping. To her Jean who was sobbing pitifully she had the strength to say, 'Don't cry my Jean; there's nothing sad in seeing one's mother leave for heaven.' And comparing life to a day, she said to her children bathed in tears, 'In a day you'll all be reunited with daddy and mama.' She seemed to have more contact with heaven than earth, for even her five children in tears could not prevent her from smiling right to her last breath.

"The vision that had come to the graduating student had been realized: sunlit morning – the fragility of earthly happiness – the hope that was not disillusioned because there still remained the immense eternal happiness of heaven.

"In appearance the life of Noémie, wife and mother, of which we have

traced the broad outlines, was a frustrated life: scarcely a few years of happiness, then a difficult course over a stormy sea bristling with reefs.

"In appearance the life of Jesus was also a frustrated life... Obscurity in His childhood, in His adolescence and younger years – a few years of preaching, constantly coming up against opposition and persecution.

"On Calvary, the failure of the Lord would appear complete, pitiful. Those passing before the Crucified One wagged their heads and yelled, 'If he were truly the Son of God... he'd come down from the cross!'

"And yet He did better than come down from the it; He died thereon and wrought the redemption of the world. Since then all great works are brought about under the sign of the cross."

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"The Blessed Virgin was the Queen of Noémie's heart. One day, one of her little boys, 5 years of age, was so sick that, according to the doctor, he would not live past midnight. In anguish, the mother said the following prayer: 'Oh good Mother! If my Jacques is to make a failure of his life here below, then come and get him right away; but if he is to do some good on earth, obtain for him good health.'"

And this little Jacques would be, in fact, saved and would know a long life during which he would not fail to do much good. An Oblate of Mary Immaculate priest, a valiant missionary in Lesotho, South Africa, for very many years, he is today 98 years old. He enjoys good health and continues to busy himself with his many poor Africans, sending them goods of all sorts and useful things to meet their needs. He is in-



Rome - Pope John Paul II talking with Fr. Jacques and Fr. Émile Gilbert, O.M.I.

terested in reading *Le Royaume* and benevolently follows the evolution of the Works. For many years he has maintained a fraternal correspondence with Mother Paul-Marie. His letters, written with a still firm hand, arrive regularly, always bearing a message of appreciation and encouragement. A number of them have been published in the book "*Le dernier coup'... et l'héroïque pardon!*"

And what became of the other Gilbert boys, orphans of father and mother? "Buffeted by the tempest, inured by the squalls, the little survivors were not abandoned by the Star of the Sea to whom their mother had entrusted them. Because she had fashioned in them a heart like unto hers, they followed in her luminous and profound wake...."

The oldest, Paul, became a doctor like his father. Marc, the second, became a civil engineer and was the happy father of 16 children. As for Jean, marked from infancy by an infirmity, he answered the call to a vocation in religious life as a son of Sant John Baptist of La Salle. After Father Jacques entered the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, it was in this religious congregation dedicated to our good Mother in heaven that Emile wished to dedicate himself to God and to souls. He, likewise, was a missionary in Africa, for 53 years, employing all his talents there. He had hoped to die there, but, on the contrary, returned to Canada in his old age, aided by his brother, Jacques, until the end. He died in January 2004 at the age of 95, after a full life.

From on high in heaven, the valiant parents most certainly watched over their children, who were able to make fruitful the heritage received. The foundations had been solidly laid and, thanks to the mother's desire, the Church was served by two priestly, missionary vocations and a vocation to life in religion.

Enriched by her own personal virtues, she was able to fashion religious souls in all her children, thus permitting the valor of her life to radiate over and beyond death and the years, for even today Noémie speaks to us.

**Father Jacques Gilbert, O.M.I.**

(Summary by Sister France Bergeron, O.F.F.M.)